

Diabetes, Type 2: Taking Care of Yourself



What is type 2 diabetes?

Type 2 diabetes is a lifelong disease that starts when your body cannot make enough of the hormone insulin or when the body's tissues cannot use insulin properly.

Insulin lets blood sugar, or glucose, from food enter your body's cells. The cells use glucose for energy.

Without insulin, this sugar cannot get into your cells to do its work. It stays in your blood. Your blood sugar level then gets too high.

Over the years, high blood sugar levels can damage blood vessels and nerves. You will have a bigger chance of getting eye, heart, blood vessel, nerve, and kidney disease.

What are some symptoms to watch for?

Some people do not have symptoms. You may get symptoms when your blood sugar is too high or too low.

Follow your doctor's instructions about what to do if you see symptoms.

High blood sugar

High blood sugar usually comes on over hours or days. You usually have time to treat high blood sugar so that you can prevent an emergency. Symptoms include being thirstier than usual, urinating more than usual, losing weight, and having blurry vision.

High blood sugar may be caused by not taking your diabetes medicine, eating too much, being stressed, being sick, or taking other medicines, such as corticosteroids.

Low blood sugar

Low blood sugar usually happens quickly. Watch for it so you can take quick action.

Symptoms may include sweating, weakness, shakiness, and hunger. If your blood sugar drops lower, symptoms may include confusion, not being able to concentrate, slurred speech, and blurred vision. It's also possible that you may pass out (lose consciousness).

Causes include taking too much of your diabetes medicines, exercising hard without eating enough food, and drinking too much alcohol. If you take certain diabetes medicines and you lose weight, miss meals, or get sick, you may also get low blood sugar. Very low blood sugar levels usually only happen in people who take insulin.

Keep some quick-sugar foods with you at all times. These will help raise your blood sugar in about 15 minutes. Quick-sugar foods include hard candy, glucose tablets, juice, and raisins.

How is diabetes treated?

The key to treating your type 2 diabetes is keeping your blood sugar in a safe range. This is called your target range. When you control your blood sugar, you help avoid or delay the long-term problems that diabetes can cause.

You may need to take one or more medicines. If medicine doesn't work, you may need to take insulin. You will also need to check your blood sugar at home.

Tests also are part of your treatment. A hemoglobin A1c test finds your average blood sugar level over 3 months. Your doctor can use this test to adjust your diabetes treatment, if needed.

You'll need other tests to check the health of your eyes, kidneys, and heart.

What can you do at home?

Eat healthy foods, and spread carbohydrate throughout the day. Carbohydrate affects blood sugar more than any other nutrient. It's in breads, cereals, vegetables, fruit, milk, yogurt, and sugary foods like candy and cake.

If you take diabetes medicine, take it exactly as prescribed. Do not stop or change your medicine without talking to your doctor first.

Check and record your blood sugar as often as recommended. These records can help your doctor see how you are doing and adjust your treatment if needed.

Try to do moderate activity for at least 2½ hours a week. One way to do this is to be active 30 minutes a day, at least 5 days a week. Walking is a good choice. You also can try other activities, like running or playing team sports.

Limit alcohol. The American Diabetes Association recommends that women with diabetes have no more than 1 drink a day and men with diabetes have no more than 2 drinks a day.

Do not smoke. If you need help quitting, talk to your doctor about stop-smoking programs and medicines. These can increase your chances of quitting for good.

Get support. You may be overwhelmed by how much you need to learn and change. Talk with your family and friends about your feelings, and ask for help if you need it.

Take steps to prevent problems that diabetes can cause. Work with your doctor to manage your blood pressure and cholesterol, and talk to your doctor about foot exams and other tests. Also ask your doctor if taking low-dose aspirin is right for you.

Wear medical identification at all times. If you have an accident, this identification lets people know that you have diabetes. You can buy medical identification that looks like jewelry at your pharmacy.

Have a sick-day plan. Work with your doctor to make a plan for what to do when you are sick. Your blood sugar can change, depending on the illness and whether you can keep food down.